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**BEST LEADERSHIP PRACTICES  
for Caring and Successful Schools**

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# A Vision of Schools With Heart and Spirit

*How to Get There*

*Linda Lantieri*

### **RUSSIAN JACK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA**

It is springtime in Anchorage. Russian Jack is an elementary school that has been part of a particular social and emotional learning (SEL) program—the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP)—for more than a decade. The sun is bright and warm; the flowers are blooming in contrast to the not-so-distant mountain peaks that peer over the city with a winter-wonderland splendor.

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Upon entering Russian Jack, one can't help but notice a sign posted on the entrance doorway. It reads, "Our mission at Russian Jack, a school of cultural diversity, is to ensure that each student is actively involved in their learning, while developing a positive sense of self and becoming a productive citizen who will contribute to society in a meaningful way."

Continuing down the hallway, to the right there is a large glass display case. Inside are myriad art projects, bright colorful masks, and drums. A sign above it reads, "These masks and drums are representative of the culture of the Inuit people of Alaska. They were made by our Young Ambassadors, students dedicated to promoting a deeper understanding of the rich cultural diversity of the children at Russian Jack Elementary School."

Up the stairs toward the second floor, a huge banner is in view, with the letters P-E-A-C-E—large, multicolored letters sewn over a pastel backdrop. It is magnificent. Young people probably read this several times a day as they go back and forth to the library and their classrooms; adults read it, too.

Teachers and children alike are working in groups, talking and sharing ideas. Classroom walls display several indicators that social and emotional learning is front and center at this school. "Put-up" charts line walls. "I-Messages" and "Active Listening" are listed as tools to be used for communication in the classroom. There is a calmness in the air, not the frenzy one can sometimes feel in schools.

Recess begins on the playground. It is a warm and clear day. The sun is up and shining almost all day at this time of the year: The children are playful and carefree. Mediators stand by in the lunchroom and outdoors. Several times a conflict begins to erupt, but mediators intervene immediately. The library mediation room is available in case it gets too cold to mediate outside.

These images from Anchorage offer hints of what can happen when an educational vision that recognizes the full range of human qualities possessed by our students is put into practice. This chapter touches on some of the things administrators and teams of teachers can do to transform a school's culture, drawing from my own experience as an elementary school assistant principal and director of a middle school, both in New York City, as well as from my experience as the founding director of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), a comprehensive SEL program.

## ENVISIONING SCHOOLS WITH HEART AND SPIRIT

Amidst the social crises of the 1980s and 1990s, we waited for young people to really get in trouble, even kill each other, before we responded with programs to create safe schools. More recently, we have seen a number of high-profile killings—including multiple murders linked to suicide by the perpetrators—among young people in the more affluent suburbs. These environments differ, as do the particulars of each individual case of “senseless” violence, but the common threads include fatalism, despair, and a lack of human connectedness. If the lessons learned from the violence of the late 1990s was insufficient, certainly the events of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath should teach us not to wait for more and more young people to lose their sense of community and purpose before we invite heart and spirit into education.

What would it mean to nurture experiences in intentional ways so that our classrooms could be places that facilitate emotional, social, and spiritual growth? In the schools of heart and spirit that I envision, the following would be true:

- The uniqueness and inherent value of every individual would be honored, and education would be seen as a lifelong process.
- Students and teachers alike would be engaged in inquiry, exploring and learning about what has heart and meaning for themselves. Different ways of knowing would be respected—those for which we could test and others too subjective to be measured—and we would pay as much attention to whether a student has a sense of his or her purpose in life as we do to his or her SAT scores.
- Schools leaders would shift from a centralized concept of power to approaches that help individuals and groups to self-organize.
- We add to the kind of “school spirit” that comes from winning a football game a greater concern with the spirit of collaboration and partnership and an appreciation of diversity within the school community.
- There would be a place and time for silence and stillness to help us face the chaos and complexity of life yet stay in touch with inner truth and the web of interconnectedness.
- We would provide all students and educators with outlets to put to use their gifts of intuition, imagination, and creativity.

- We would see the organization and mission of the school as reflective of the pursuit of social justice.

In short, I believe we need to see schools as active and alive organisms that place a high value on self-knowledge, healthy interpersonal relationships, the building of community, and care for our planet. These goals are not incompatible with the pursuit of academic excellence—indeed, they foster it. Without care, respect, and kindness, what purpose does intellectual competence serve?

As school leaders across the country realize the need for this work, I first encourage them to look within and ask themselves where they would like their schools to be. Schools embracing an SEL program know it isn't a quick fix, but a long-term commitment to building a new school culture. Arlene, a principal in New Jersey, explains why these efforts are worth it.

This work has made a difference in my district, my school, and in my personal life. No other effort has touched so many people in my professional world and become so much a part of them—I can say with confidence that what has been learned will outlast our contact with the trainers. The language of RCCP has become woven into how we talk about what we do and how we care for one another in ways that no other approach I know has ever done.

When school leaders begin making a commitment to SEL, they start to realize that any real, long-lasting change isn't going to happen unless it becomes a part of the school culture—the ideologies, philosophies, expectations, attitudes, and practices important to the members of the school. What is the climate of this school like? How do the people act toward one another? Is there a lot of aggression? Is there an atmosphere of trust? Do people celebrate their differences and work toward collaborative problem solving? School culture affects every decision that is made. Ideally, it is the thread that holds schools together—a very durable thread, like the kind that is used to sew on buttons and adjust hems—the kind that doesn't easily break.

## **CHANGING SCHOOL CULTURES: SEEING THE RESULTS OF SEL**

So how does SEL affect a school's culture? The following shows what a successful SEL program looks like.

### **Relationships Become Transformed**

Young people and adults talk with a new level of articulation and passion about issues of diversity and about how to resolve conflict, manage emotions, and express feelings. And a transformation in the relationships people establish with others emerges from the self-reflection fostered by this work.

### **Problem Solving Is Commonplace**

A problem-solving approach to daily school conflict is commonplace. It would be expected at a staff meeting for people to show respect for each other by managing their emotions, calmly stating their own views, and listening carefully and actually considering the viewpoints of others. In schools where this work has taken root, there are many opportunities to increase open communication among all sectors of the school community. There is an unspoken code that "at this school we talk about issues, we don't shove them under the table."

### **Diversity Is Respected and Valued**

True respect and valuing of diversity permeate schools with a commitment to SEL. Young people and adults realize that the ways in which we interpret conflict and communication styles is very much influenced by cultural background, gender, and personal style, and they think twice before they jump to conclusions or use racial slurs to discriminate. They have the skills to "separate the people from the problem" and use these skills in their interactions. So there's a widely observed decrease in negative stereotypes as everyone becomes more accepting of differences, which opens communication between students, teachers, administrators, and parents as well.

## **Norms Do Not Support Violence or Bias**

In schools that implement SEL, there is a vigilance about changing social norms that support violent behavior. Everything that happens in the school—the curriculum, the daily bulletins, the school activities, the discipline procedures—all state clearly that violence is not okay. Teachers talk with young people about the issues they are confronting. They explore together the alternatives and consequences to their actions. Together, they build a “culture of safety,” a feeling of emotional and physical security. As the environment grows more cooperative and caring, the use of skills learned by adults and young people increases.

There are strong sanctions against violence and bias-related incidents. Weapons are grounds for expulsion. Derogatory racial comments are viewed as precursors to possible violent actions. They are not slid under the carpet, but are addressed when they arise, through open communication or constructive disciplinary action. Fighting is handled decisively and constructively, and not with a knee-jerk reaction of suspension.

Administrators struggle with the issue of school suspension. They know that suspending a student does nothing to change his or her behavior. At times, it does create a safer learning environment for others, particularly when a young person’s actions consistently interrupt the teaching–learning process. But young people who are suspended are sent out into the community with few resources to change their ways and work themselves back into the school environment. So teachers strive to reduce the conflicts that result in suspendable actions. Because they are preventive in their approach, fewer issues blow up in the classroom. In-school suspension rooms can also be very effective, when they are used as places for teacher and student to be apart, cool off, and problem solve. Teachers, too, need to be willing to regroup and find ways that will help to reduce or extinguish the negative behavior.

When a student absolutely has to be suspended or expelled for a serious offense, it is important to provide opportunities for that student to receive the help he or she needs. Today we are seeing an increase in alternative schools as placements for students who have been removed from the regular education system, yet these students need to be given the opportunity to learn skills in how to manage their emotions and resolve conflicts nonviolently and

creatively—and to learn that these skills are seen as core components of their educational experience. The focus needs to be on moving from punishment to positive discipline, in whatever way that can happen. A suspended student's time may be better spent learning social competency skills, doing community service, or receiving home teaching.

### **Democracy and Teamwork Flourish**

Another notable feature of such schools is that power is shared in a spirit of creating a democratic environment. Principals and other administrators involved in SEL develop their skills in communication and group dynamics. They attend introductory training sessions, management retreats, and advanced workshops, and so do their staff members. They all know that organizations are healthier and consequently more successful when leadership is facilitative—when power is shared among the people in the organization.

Teamwork becomes the *modus operandi* for getting things done, and becoming an administrator at a peaceable school requires a whole reevaluation of how decisions are made. If we encourage openness and truth and the sharing of information, we have to be willing to make decisions based on clear observational criteria. It's then more difficult to be discriminatory, because it's usually subjective criteria that shut certain people out of opportunities. We can claim to have certain values and principles, but until our actions actually operationalize these ways of being, we fall short. And this shift doesn't come easily.

Although many factors influence the shaping of a school's culture in this way, such schoolwide change depends on three factors in particular: trusting relationships, commitment on the part of members of the school community, and a way for this community to take ownership of the process.

## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, ESTABLISHING COMMITMENT, AND CREATING OWNERSHIP**

School leaders who have undertaken the task of shifting a school's culture already realize the importance of working to build

relationships. They ask themselves, How do people relate to each other in the school community and in what ways must this change? Relationships between individual adults, between individual students, and between adults and students become mutually supportive and strengthened through a commitment to the peaceable school. Through understanding, empathy, and respect for each other, a cooperative school spirit is established.

Just before Roberta became principal of P.S. 75 in Manhattan some years ago, her staff had lost trust—trust in the leadership, trust in each other. The school had no backbone, nothing to tie it together. She decided to get involved with RCCP as a way to bring this school together. “People didn’t have trust in this place. They didn’t trust children. They didn’t trust parents. They didn’t trust each other,” she says. “There was no such thing as a staff party. I felt that this place needed a lot of support. But I also felt they needed a method in which to communicate and do things.”

Young people recognize the importance of the quality of school relationships, too. Matt, a student mediator from Vista, California, said one day, “I think what’s best about this school is the respect we kids get from the adults here. They care about how we think and what we have to say.” Responses to a survey administered to students at Myrtle Banks Elementary School in New Orleans pointed across the board to the importance of the bonds students felt with their teachers (Patti, 1996). When asked what students liked best about their school, nearly every fifth- and sixth-grade student said something positive about their teachers and that they felt teachers cared about them. Interestingly enough, the dedication of teachers at this same school was reflected in their own statements: “I’ve been here for 15 years, and although these children come here with so many problems, I could never go teach anywhere else. These children need us here. For some of them, we’re the only family they have.” Clearly, relationship building is a priority in this school.

Having a common purpose and commitment is also crucial to long-term effectiveness, a fact borne out by the literature on school change. To develop these commonalities, school staff have to create an environment in which they can discover what they really care about, and then they have to get together so they can talk about their visions. When schools decide to begin this work, they first talk a lot—and listen, too. Involving all the key

stakeholders—teachers, students, parents, and administrators—in this process early on ensures that the plan and direction of building a comprehensive SEL effort is understood and embraced by all.

But getting to core values, the deeply held beliefs that individuals collectively agree to put at the foundation of all they do in a school, is a long-term process. This vision of what a school believes and wants to be for its young people grows over time. Trying to decide in a few meetings what a school is all about leads to mistakes.

Creating ownership, getting an active “buy-in” for a program of change, even when it is largely supported in principle by teachers, requires hard work and a clear plan on the part of the school leader. Jackie, principal of Empresa Elementary School in Vista, California, talked about this process at her school when she began implementing RCCP.

You need to involve all staff in the decision to implement a program like RCCP. Throughout the process we sent groups of staff members to each training cycle until every person who works at Empresa had received the [training]. The structure of the training encouraged staff to bond with one another and also to bond with the concepts taught.

My part in the development process was to keep enthusiasm for the program alive and allow it to flourish. A leadership team of staff members and I met monthly to review how the program was being embraced and what strategies were needed to maintain our dream. We developed a multifaceted approach.

A group of third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders were chosen to become Junior Ambassadors. Our well-trained problem-solvers visited all classrooms and presented RCCP lessons to other children. We recognized two children from each classroom monthly with a “Peacemakers Award.” Classmates nominated and voted on who should receive these awards. Their pictures went up on the peacemakers board, and a free pizza luncheon was given to the award recipients. Recently we received a safety grant from the state of California and provided a 3-day advanced

peacemaking skills training for [the] fourth- and fifth-graders who became mediators at our school.

It was also important to maintain teacher enthusiasm for the program. In order to encourage staff to teach the RCCP lessons in the classroom, our RCCP mentor teacher, with the input from staff, identified 10 lessons for each grade level to teach. Then particular literature selections were identified and a lesson plan developed to support and extend learning for each of the RCCP lessons. Also, posters that highlight specific problem-solving strategies are prominently displayed in every classroom for consistency across grade levels.

Finally, it was extremely important that every person on this campus “talked the talk” as a model for students. When Vicki, the assistant principal, and I meet with children, staff, or parents we consistently model acceptance and problem-solving behavior. Our hope is that when children are faced with a problem they will be able to successfully have their needs met without hurt feelings or anger becoming physical. On occasion, we have also mediated staff conflict. Since they all talk the same talk, dealing with conflict has become, instead of a confrontation, a strategy session on how to accomplish a goal better. We problem solve anger into understanding.

Jackie’s explanation gives some important insights into how this work begins to become a natural part of the school. Teachers participate in finding new and creative ways to teach the lessons, conduct schoolwide activities, and create their own variations of the work—variations that are strong, sustainable components of the program and clearly reflective of their particular school’s culture. When this kind of ownership and involvement happens, those leading the innovation can step back just a little, while never relinquishing their support or ceasing to model the skills themselves in all they do.

Patience is an important part of the process too—knowing that not everybody’s going to come along right away and that some may always be resistant to any change. Even when you feel that you’re well along, there will be hills and valleys. It’s not uncommon for school members to want to see change happen

immediately. This is just one of the many challenges administrators face in the process of integrating SEL into their schools. But the results make it worthwhile.

## **FACING THE FUTURE, MEETING THE CHALLENGES AS EDUCATIONAL LEADERS**

In my work with superintendents, principals, teachers, and parents, I've asked hundreds of groups in the United States and other countries this question: "If you could go to bed tonight and wake up in the morning with the power to ensure that you could teach one thing to all the children of the world, what would it be?" The responses are similar no matter where I am or whom I ask: that children feel loved, that they know they have a purpose, that they learn tolerance and compassion, and that they have a sense of their interconnectedness with other people and with the natural world. As educators, how can we not consciously and systematically attend to that which we dearly feel matters most?

In a recent survey of 272 "global thinkers" from around the world, five shared values emerged: compassion, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect (Loges & Kidder, 1997). These values seem to be so universal that it appears they are agreed on regardless of one's religious or spiritual perspective. And when the American Association of School Administrators asked 50 education leaders a similar question—What would students need to know and be able to do to thrive during the next century?—civility and ethical behavior were on the list along with math and science (Uchida, 1996). So we seem to agree on some of the fundamental tasks of education and the fact that they extend beyond helping young people stay out of trouble and achieve academic competence. As we work toward operationalizing what it means to have caring schools of sound character, we will find ourselves needing to outline in greater detail the steps needed to strengthen the shared values such schools will embody.

The good news is that this work has begun. Already, we can read about many school systems across the country that have used the frameworks developed by social scientists to bring together under one umbrella various efforts for preventing "risky" or antisocial behavior among young people. This approach

acknowledges that the development of social and emotional skills is a critical factor in school-based prevention efforts, and it calls for an integration of the cognitive and affective domains for all students as a means of enhancing their chances for academic and personal success.

How successful will educational administrators and leaders be in welcoming a comprehensive approach to SEL in our schools? It will depend on how honestly those of us who are struggling to live an integrated life are willing to talk about and share our struggle with our more skeptical colleagues. And there are a few challenges ahead for those who want to give this movement some continued momentum.

### **Redefinition**

We first have to continue to redefine what it means to be an educated person. This is a worldwide challenge to widen the vision of education beyond mastering a body of knowledge as measured on standardized tests. Even teachers who use our well-established RCCP are telling us that they are hanging on by a thread to make room for teaching our curriculum. It will help to meet the educational field where it is by acknowledging that academics are and always will be central. The new vision of education that we are talking about has the potential for producing students who not only have direction and purpose in life but who are also emotionally and socially skillful, and more academically competent as well. It is not an either-or situation, and we have to communicate that.

### **Rededication**

The second challenge is for adults to let young people show us how we can help them cultivate their emotional, social, and inner lives, including openness and creativity. J. Robert Oppenheimer, one of the pioneers of nuclear energy, once said, "There are children playing in the streets who could solve some of the top problems in physics because they have modes of sensory perception that I lost long ago" (as cited in McLuhan & Fiore, 1984). Exploration, innovation, and creativity often come more easily to children and young people, and children are interested in life's most basic questions. Our task is to remember how integrated young children are

and to find ways to protect that from being trampled on. This is part of teaching the whole child.

Sadly, as children move through our schools, they often receive spoken and unspoken messages that experiences related to their heart and spirit are not honored as part of their reality. The older they become, the more repressed, forgotten, and locked within themselves awareness and experience become. Adolescence offers an opportunity to reopen this line of inquiry, yet young people at this stage are usually met once again with the adult tendency to ignore or trivialize their experiences. What complicates matters is that few of us have experienced as learners the kind of holistic education we want to put into practice as teachers and administrators. If we hope to be part of bringing this work into schools, we will each need to find positive models and experiences that can show us how to live and teach in a more integrated way.

### **Research**

The third challenge is to root this work in scientific research, as well as in sound pedagogy and child development theory. Current research in social and emotional learning and positive youth development has already begun to make the connection to school success; it is important that we encourage further work in this direction.

### **Reflection**

Finally, we can't think about doing this work in classrooms without supporting teachers in the nurturing of their own emotional, social, and inner lives. Many of us want to help young people find a deeper sense of community and purpose, but we can't give what we don't have. In *The Courage to Teach* (1998), Parker Palmer wrote, "We teach who we are."

This work isn't about giving our students a road map. Effective teaching that has a lasting and deep impact on students must flow from the quality of each teacher's own inner life. One cannot know the subject area of one's teaching, and how to connect it meaningfully to the lives of students, without a strong sense of self-awareness and self-understanding (Palmer, 1998). And the

best teaching is matched to the soul of one's students, a process that cannot be successful if a teacher is distant from his or her own soul.

Nel Noddings, educator and author of *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (1992), beautifully summed up the kind of education that blends emotional intelligence and intellectual development.

I have argued that education should be organized around themes of care rather than traditional disciplines. All students should emerge in a general education that guides them in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals, and the environment, the human-made world and ideas. Such an aim doesn't work against intellectual development or academic achievement. On the contrary, it supplies a firm foundation for both. (Noddings, 1992)

And Daniel Goleman wrote,

This new focus moves some of the key elements of emotional intelligence into a deeper dimension. Self-awareness takes on a new depth of inner exploration; managing emotions becomes self-discipline; empathy becomes a basis for altruism, caring, and compassion. And all of these basic skills for life can now be seen as building blocks of character. (Goleman, 2001)

A window of opportunity exists right now in the field of education for heart and spirit to enter. We must use this opening to broaden this work even further, and we need to support each other and engage people of all persuasions in this unfolding process.

Our mission is to insist that we develop policies and approaches that enable all our children to have their human spirits uplifted and their emotional, social, and inner lives nourished as a normal, natural part of their schooling. It will take enormous courage and energy to work across existing boundaries. Far from being marginal or irrelevant, attention to these matters will help us achieve the equilibrium we need in this chaotic world; we must foster the compassion, insight, and commitment to community that

will be necessary to tackle the deep emotional, social, political, and spiritual dilemmas of our time.

As I look at the huge problems our young people will inherit—racism, poverty, violence, terrorism, the degradation of nature—I can't imagine how we will make it if we leave heart and spirit out. Educational leaders must be at the forefront of finding ways to ensure that no child is left behind and that the human mind, heart, and spirit all are welcomed in our homes, communities, and especially our schools.

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